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(U) Are Obscure Languages Still... Obscure?

FROM: (U//FOUO) ██████████████

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(U//FOUO) *Editor's intro: A SID language analyst takes a plunge into the obscure (by studying a little-known African language) and winds up (a little bit) famous.*

(U//FOUO) When you work with people who are brilliant, but are yourself merely reasonably bright, you feel you have to be willing to do things nobody else wants to do. That's been my career path. I volunteer for almost anything I think I can do and a few things I'm not at all sure I can do. Almost two years ago, I chose to cross-train from being a language analyst in Korean -- a language I had worked for almost fifteen years -- to try to learn a language I'd never heard of. My chief motivation was that although I felt I was **good** at my job, I was surrounded by people who I thought were **great.** So I decided to attempt to work in a language I thought was important, but one in which NSA had not yet grown a deep pool of talent.

(S//SI//REL) I chose Tigrinya, a language spoken by 7 million people in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its strategic importance comes largely from two factors. One is that the government of Ethiopia is dominated by ethnic Tigrayans, so Tigrinya has semi-official status among policy-makers. Secondly, the tiny nation of Eritrea is thought to play a role

in destabilizing many of the weak nation-states in the Horn of Africa by training, funding, and possibly arming insurgent groups. Because the nations Eritrea is involved in include Somalia and Sudan, two important nations to U.S. national interests, Tigrinya has a higher importance than would be apparent by the relatively low number of speakers.

(U//FOUO) When I started my training, I realized I had gone to the right language if I wanted to take the road less travelled. Including me, my class had a total of... one student. My instructor and I used the only two Tigrinya grammar books written in English for the first few months. One of them was written by a missionary forty years ago. The other borrows heavily from the first.

(U//FOUO) After that, I scoured the internet for movies, news, books, music -- anything we could find in Tigrinya. I found to my surprise that even in this day and age, it is still hard to find a lot of what a non-native linguist really needs for less-commonly-taught-languages (LCTL). In Korean, there are thousands of videos on-line that are well-subtitled. But in Tigrinya, there are few videos anywhere that have reliable subtitling. There is one Tigrinya novel available online, and it has no English translation.

(S//SI//REL) When I finished class, I found I was able to function reasonably well on the job. That was good, because for much of my work, I was very much performing without a net. In Korean, I was used to anything I did being checked over (perhaps too much for my own liking) at least once. There was a well-established quality-checking process that was at once restricting and reassuring. Here, if I *say* something is so, it *is* so. You can imagine how terrifying this feels if you are saying Eritrea is selling weapons to a rebel group in Sudan based on your gut perception of nuances of a language you'd never heard of two years ago.

(S//SI//REL) It has been eye-opening coming from a major production language to an LCTL. Our testing experience is entirely different from the big languages, because ours are literally made one at a time. Our online dictionary only partially works, and has only one 20 year-old dictionary as a source. I still cannot type at work using native text, despite eight months of trying various technical tricks (and even though I have been typing in Tigrinya at home since the first week of class). Everything is different about working an LCTL.

(S//SI//REL) Although we do have contract native linguists I can send difficult material to, I cannot sit with them and ask why what was said means what it means. Sometimes, there are roadblocks in the language I just cannot get around. And that is the crux of the work I now do -- being smart enough to know when I don't know something. My co-workers, many of whom have been working in LCTLs for decades, are not so much trainers as they are inspirational models of tenacity.

(U//FOUO) If you have ever thought of cross-training into an LCTL, perhaps allured, as I was, by the romance of sailing into unknown waters, I'm not here to stop you. I've felt richly rewarded for my decision, and I've done some of the most valuable work I've done at the Agency in the short time since I cross-trained. But be ye warned -- for much of your sailing, you'll be off the map.